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WOMAN'S USE OF DISCURSIVE REASON IN
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE HUMANISM

by

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Recently considerable attention has been given to the works of women philosophers such as Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), Margaret Cavendish (1624-1674), Ann Conway (1631-1679), Mary Astell (1688-1731), and Mary Wollstonecraft (1757-1797).¹ These philosophers are often called the 'women of reason' because of their continuous use of arguments based on reason and the observation of the senses. In a broad use of the phrase 'discursive reason' to represent the development of interconnected arguments in relation to a common theme, it can be said that these seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers excelled in their exercise of discursive reasoning.

In this paper it will be shown that these women of reason did not spring out of a philosophical vacuum. Instead they followed upon a fertile period of philosophical activity in Italy in which there were many "women of reason" who functioned as precursors. The works of the Italian Renaissance Humanist movement in the fourteenth to sixteenth century will be considered in the following four categories: works initiated by or dedicated to women, the presence of female participants in dialogues, arguments by men that women should use discursive reasoning, and works by women who directly use discursive reasoning.

Works initiated by or dedicated to women

One of the earliest humanist texts was the Canzone d' Amore also known as "Donna mi priega". It was written by Guido Cavalcanti (1255-1300) in response to a woman's questions about love, namely "where it is posited and who makes it created, and what its virtue is and its power, its essence and its very movement..."² The philosophical questions about love were met by a long philosophical text full of discursive reasoning.

In a different format Lionardo Bruni D'Arezzo (1368-1444) wrote a letter to Baptista di Montefeltro entitled De Studiis et Literis. This text is considered to be the earliest humanist work written directly to a woman

about the subject of woman's education.³ After listing previous women philosophers and encouraging his student to learn Latin well Bruni concentrates on the area of ethics:

You must enter into such questions as the sufficiency of Virtue to Happiness; or whether, if Happiness consists in Virtue, it can be destroyed by torture, imprisonment or exile; whether, admitting that these may prevent a man from being happy, they can be further said to make him miserable. Again, does Happiness consist (with Epicurus) in the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain; or (with Xenophon) in the consciousness of uprightness: or (with Aristotle) in the practice of Virtue? These inquiries are, of all others, most worthy to be pursued by men and women alike; they are fit material for formal discussion and for literary exercise.⁴

In addition to encouraging Batista to think with her powers of discursive reasoning Bruni also argues that she should learn how to express her thoughts philosophically in writing.

Another example of a text written for a woman is found in Antonio Bonfini d'Ascoli's (1427-1502) Symposium de virginitate et pudicitia coniugali. A figure named 'Queen Beatrix' takes a central role in the dialogue which was dedicated to the real Queen Beatrix.⁵ The frequent use of a female character in dialogues of the Italian Renaissance will now be examined.

The Presence of female participants in dialogues

Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), often called the "first humanist" frequently used a female figure named 'Laura' in his works. In Triumphs Laura moves from being the simple object of Petrarch's devotion to a guide who has total self-knowledge and self-governance. Then in a Canzonieri entitled "Rime invita e morte di Madonna Laura" Laura is developed as the embodiment of the powers of reason in relation to Petrarch's overwhelming emotions.⁶ In this way Laura functions for Petrarch much in the way that Beatrice functioned for Dante in The Divine Comedy. In both authors the female figure in the dialogue was based on a real woman whom they loved, but in the written texts the personage was developed far beyond that actual woman represented.

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) in a similar way developed a figure named

'Fiammetta' who is thought to be based on a real woman named Maria d'Aquino. In the dialogue Filocolo Fiammetta represents Boccaccio's own view, namely that reason ought to be used to order the instincts. She argues that 'virtues of the mind' are preferable to lapses in self governance.⁷ In the dialogue Amorous Fiammetta, however, the figure Fiammetta seeks to live under the sway of her emotions while another female figure, a nurse, uses her reason to argue that she should place "advised reason before lawless will."⁸ It is in the Decameron, Boccaccio's most well known work, that female figures assume a fundamental role in relation to the use of reason in philosophical argumentation. The dialogue consists of one hundred short narratives given by seven women and three men in which a continuous exchange of ideas, arguments, and stories focus on various aspects of human nature. In the dialogue, for example, Fiammetta argues that an individual ought to be trained as a warrior to conquer his own appetites and to move into self mastery.⁹ Finally, in the text Concerning Famous Women Boccaccio gave what is considered to be the first collection of short histories of women in the West. He records what he calls the examples of "keen intelligence" and "intellectual power" of women.¹⁰ Therefore, Boccaccio is an important contributor to the concept of woman as capable of the highest use of discursive reason.

The neo-Platonist developments in Renaissance Humanism strongly continued this trend of introducing female figures who excel in the use of their reason. Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the key figure in the revival of Platonism in Italy, wrote a popular commentary on Plato's Symposium.¹¹ In the dialogue Diotima is presented as the guide of Socrates in moving through a dialectic from the lowest to the highest forms of philosophical love. Ficino's commentary reiterated the example of a female figure teaching a male how to exercise his reason in philosophical debate.

One of Ficino's disciples Leone Ebreo (1460-c.1521) wrote Dialoghi d'amore

in which the female figure named 'Sophia' guided the male student named 'Philo' towards a deeper understanding of the nature of philosophical love. The dialogue abounds in the exercise of discursive reasoning in long and sustained debate. It also frequently added the interjection of humour around issues of reasoning, fallacies, and the interaction of Philo and Sophia who personify young passionate love and mature wisdom respectively. 12

Some other examples of female figures leading dialogues are: Raffaella by Allesandro Piccolomini (1508-1578) and Le Leonora by Giuseppe Betussi (1523-1560). In both dialogues the female figure after whom the dialogue is named opens and directs the debate. Lodovico Domenichi(1515-1564) wrote two dialogues in which women disputants were given central positions: Dialogo D'Amore and La Nobilita delle donne.¹³ In the latter dialogue the argument also introduces the examples of women intellectuals such as Vittoria Colonna, Isabella Colonna, Sappho, and the Countess of Gambara.

It is sometimes argued that the use of female figures who represent the ideal woman in works written by men does not have any positive consequences for actual women because the ideal is so far removed from the real situation of women. However, I would argue that in these texts in Italian Renaissance Humanism, there are so many examples of women exercising their reason at the highest levels of philosophical debate, that the dialogues created an atmosphere in which women were more and more accepted in philosophical disputation with men. The interaction of the ideal and the real began to occur more and more often until women were full participants with men in discussions based on arguments of reason. This will be seen more fully in the next two sections of the paper.

Arguments by men that women should use reason

The first work in Italian Renaissance Humanism to include actual women as participants in the discussion is The Book of the Courtier by Baldesar Castiglione (1478-1529). Two constant members of the discussion were the Duchess Elizabetta and

Emilia Pia. The dialogues are reported by Castiglione to have been modeled on actual discussions that took place in the Duchess' rooms. He also writes in the introduction that he decided to publish them because Vittoria della Colonna had distributed an earlier copy he had given her. In the dialogue itself it is the men who make the strongest arguments for women to use their powers of reason. Magnifico, who appears to represent Castiglione's views concludes: "I say that women can understand all the things men can understand and that the intellect of a woman can penetrate wherever a man's can." 14.

In Italian Renaissance Humanism there was a direct conflict between those authors who argued that a woman ought to develop her powers of reason and those who argued that she should not. In The Courtier the negative position was represented by a character named 'Gasparo'. The usual pattern for those on the negative side was to invoke Aristotle, and for those on the positive side to invoke Plato. Castiglione enters into a rather thorough discussion of the issues involved in his defence of woman's capacities to reason. Some of the earlier authors who argued that women ought not to study books or papers are: Angelo Pandolfini (1360-1446) in Il tratto del governo della famiglia; Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454) in De re uxoria; and Leone Battista Alberti (1405-1472) in I Libri Della Famiglia. 15

On the other side of the debate in addition to Castiglione, in the fifteenth century more vigorous arguments were developed to support woman's capacity and opportunity to learn philosophy. Maffeo Vegio(1406-1458) wrote De Liberorum et Eorum Claris moribus which was an important work on the education of girls. Jacopo Filippo Foresti (1434-1520) wrote De claris mulieribus and De Illustribus Foeminis opusculum in which women philosophers were described in some detail. Pompeo Colonna (1479-1532) wrote Apologiae mulierum libri II. In this text Aristotle's thesis that woman is an imperfect animal was rejected, Plato and Petrarch were invoked in woman's defence, and several women philosophers were mentioned. Finally, Giovanni Antonio Volpi (1686-1766) argued that women ought to be able to study with men in

universities.¹⁶ With this intensification of debate about the questions surrounding woman's use of discursive reasoning, it is not surprising that women themselves began to write and argue about the topic themselves.

Writings by women in Italian Renaissance Humanism

The earliest woman writer with roots in Italy was Christine de Pisan (1363-1431) who wrote The Book of the City of Ladies, The Book of Three Virtues, Mutation of Fortune, and some short essays on the debate about the Rose. Her works contain many arguments in favor of woman's development of reason through education. However, even though Christine de Pisan was born in Italy, she spent most of her life in France. Therefore, her contributions to the area under consideration is more appropriate associated with French Humanism than with Italian Humanism.

Isotta Nogarola da Verona (1418-1466) is the woman who stands out most at the beginning of Italian Renaissance Humanism. In a dialogue entitled De Pariaut Evae atque Adae Peccato she described arguments between 'Ludovicus' and 'Isotta' concerning whether Eve or Adam are more culpable. In the debate Aristotle's arguments are frequently invoked. In one example Isotta ironically mentioned Aristotle: "Where there is less sense and less constancy, there is less sin; and that indeed is true of Eve; therefore, her sin was the less serious one...Aristotle also asserts that woman is more easily deceived than man which we understand happens on account of her weakness."¹⁷ Then in another passage she ironically used Aristotle's theory that the body is transmitted in generation by woman and the soul by man, to argue Eve's sin is less serious because it injured only herself, whereas Adam harmed all posterity since original sin is transmitted through the soul.¹⁸ The underlying logical principle in her arguments is the reductio ad absurdum.

Isotta Nogarola also engaged actively in correspondence with other humanists. There were many other women of the Italian Renaissance who engaged

in philosophical debate with men in letters. Cassandra Fidelis(1465-1558), Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547), and Veronica Gambara(1485-1550) all give evidence of philosophical reasoning in their correspondence. 19.

Several women writers also completed texts on philosophical subjects. Isabella Sforzo (Rossi)(1471-1524) wrote Della vera tranquillita dell' animo in which she supports a stoical orientation and refers to Socrates, Plato, and Plotinus. Tullia d'Aragona (1506-1565) wrote Della infinita d'amore in which a female figure 'Tullia' leads a discussion about the nature of love which includes references to Socrates, Diotima, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Plutarch, Galen, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. In both of these texts the women writers integrate their own views with those of their predecessors in the context of discursive arguments. 20.

One of the most impressive works by a woman of the Italian Humanist tradition is La Nobilita et l'eccellenza delle donne co'diffetti et managmenti de gli huomini which was written by Lucrezia Marinelli (d. 1563). This work consists of over three hundred pages of careful arguments about the nature of woman in relation to the nature of man. She argued against Aristotle and invoked Boccaccio, Plutarch, and Petrarch among others. It is the first major work written in a combination of Latin and Italian by a woman about woman's identity from a philosophical perspective. 21.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that the issue of the use of discursive reason by women was central to Italian Renaissance Humanism. This was shown by examining works dedicated to or initiated by women, by looking at the presence of female figures which used discursive reasoning in dialogues written by men, by considering arguments by men that women should use reason, and by seeing works of women writers who actually used discursive reasoning in their writings. The numerous examples which support the claim that women were encouraged to use their discursive reasoning during the Italian Renaissance show that the 'women of reason' who emerged in the post-Cartesian period of

philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were preceeded by other women as well as by men who prepared the way ~~by~~ their use of female figures who represented the highest levels of reasoning in their dialogues, by their interaction with women philosophers through correspondence and dedication of works, and by their own arguments in support of women's capacities and opportunities to develop reasoning skills. Therefore, the 'women of reason' of the Italian Renaissance prepared the way for the 'women of reason' of the post-Cartesian era.

Footnotes

1. The significant works by these authors are the following: Anna Maria van Schurman, The Learned Maid; Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, The Description of a New World Called the Blazing World, Grounds of Natural Philosophy, Philosophical and Physical Opinions, Nature's Pictures, The World's Olio, and Philosophical Fancies; Ann Conway, Countess, The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy; Mary Astell, A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for their Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest, Some Reflections Upon Marriage, An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex, Moderation Truly Stated, and Bart'lemy Fair; and Mary Wollstonecraft, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, Maria or the Wrongs of Woman, A Vindication of the Rights of Men, A Vindication of the Rights of Women. See also Hilda L. Smith, Reason's Disciples: Seventh-Century English Feminists (Urbana/Chicago/ London: University of Illinois Press, 1985)
2. Guido Cavalcanti, Canzone d'Amore in Otto Bird, Medieval Philosophic Thought as Reflected in the Canzone D'Amore of Cavalcanti According to the Commentary of Dino Del Barbo: Text and Commentary, Ph.D. Dissertation, U. of Toronto, 1939, p.7.
3. Lionardo Bruni D'Arezzo, De Studiis et Literis in William Harrison Woodward, Vittorino da Feltre and other Humanist Educators (New York: Columbia University Bureau of Publications, no. 18, 1963).
4. Ibid., p. 127.
5. Antonio Bonfini, Symposium de virginitate et pudicitia coniugali (Budapest: K.M. Egyetemi Nyomda, 1943).
6. Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparce and Other Lyrics, Translated by Robert M. Durling (Cambridge Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 64 and p. 556. Note the similarity of the role of Laura in these dialogues and that of Lady Philosophy in Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy.
7. Giovanni Boccaccio, Thirteen Most Pleasant and Delectable Questions of Love (Filocolo) Translated by Henry Carter (New York: Clarkson K. Potter, 1974), pp.91,142
8. Giovanni Boccaccio, Amorous Fiametta, edited by Edward Hutton (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Publisher, 1970), p. 243.
9. Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, Translated by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York and Scarborough: New American Library, 1982), p. 632.
10. Giovanni Boccaccio, Concerning Famous Women Trans. by Guido Guarino (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press,), p. xxxvii.
11. Marsilio Ficino Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love, Translated by Sears Jayne (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, Inc., 1985).
12. Leone Ebreo "On Love and Desire: A Dialogue between Philo and Sophia" in Renaissance Philosophy: Volume I: The Italian Philosophers, Edited by Arturo Fallico and Herman Shapiro (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1967).
13. Allesandro Piccolomini Raffaella: A Dialogue of the Fair Perfecting of Ladies, translated by J.N. (Glasgow: University Press, 1968)
Giuseppe Betussi Le Leonora in Trattati d'amore del Cinquecento (Bari: Gius. Laterza Figli, 1912); and Lodovico Domenichi Dialoghi (Ferrari: Gabriel Giolito, 1621) and La Nobilita della donne (Ferrari: Gabriel Giolito, 1551).
14. Baldesar Castiglione The Book of the Courtier, Translated by Charles Singleton (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1959), p.214.
15. Angelo Pandolfini Il tratto del governo della famiglia (Milan: Giuseppe Ripamonti Carpano, 1805),
Francesco Barbaro De re uxoria, Translated as Directions for Love and Marriage (London: John Leigh in Fleetstreet, 1677); and
Leone Battista Alberti I Libri Della Famiglia

16. Mapheo Vegio De Liberorum et Eorum Claris moribus, Books I-III in Sr., Maria Fanning, Ph. D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1933; Books IV-VI in Sr. Anne Sullivan, Ph. D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1936; Jacopo Filippo De claris mulieribus (Paris: Colinaei, 1521); Pompeo Colonna Apologiae mulierum libri II in Studi e ricerche sull' Umanesimo Italiano, edited by Guglielmo Zappacosta (Bergamo, 1972); and Giovanni Antonio Volpi, Che non debbono ammettersi le donne allo studio delle scienze e delle belle arti; discorso accademico---recitato in Padova, nell' Accademia de' Ricarati il de 16, giugno, 1723 (Padova: Giuseppe Comino, 1723)
17. Isotae Nogarolae Veronensis Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia (Budapest: Vindobonae apud Gerold et Socios, 1886), II, p. 228. Translated by Joseph Moeller.
18. Ibid., p. 231.
19. Cassandra Fidelis, Epistolae et orationes (Francifca Bolzettam, 1636); Vittoria Collona, Gaspara Stampa, and Veronica Gambara in Rime di tre gentildonne del secolo XVI (Milano, 1930); Le Piu belle pagine di Gaspare Stampa, Vittoria Colonna, Veronica Gambaro, Isabella Morra (Milano, Treves, 1935); and Rime e lettere di Veronica Gambara (Firenze: G. Barbera, 1879)
20. Isabella Sforza, Della vera tranquillita dell animo (Roma: 1544); Tullia d' Aragona, Della infinita d'amore in Trattati d'amore del cinquecento (Bari, 1912).
21. Lucrezio Marinelli, La nobilita et l'eccellenza delle donne co'diffetti et mangamenti de gli huomini (Venetia: Gio Battiste Giote Sanese, 1601).